

A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Inquiry at a Canadian University: Protective and Risk Factors for Chinese International Students in COVID Times with Gender Comparison

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ABSTRACT

This hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry explores the lived experiences of Chinese international students at a Canadian university in COVID times with gender comparison. Ten participants between 20 and 30 years of age are interviewed via Zoom meetings and WeChat videos to reveal specific insights they have gained from their experiences. Based on resilience theory as a theoretical framework, the findings display the students' protective factors, including internal assets and external resources, i.e., perceived competence, coping skills, self-efficacy, family connectedness, parental support, peer support, school connectedness, and community support, and the risk factors the students face during these challenging times, i.e., academic barriers, mental issues, health threats, and racial prejudices. The interactions of protective factors and risk factors are examined, in reducing or avoiding the negative effects of adversity exposure. Special resilience-based interventions are discussed.

Keywords: Chinese international students, COVID-19, resilience theory

INTRODUCTION

Around the world, the greatest proportion of international students is from China (Ge et al., 2019). Unsurprisingly, in the past 20 years, numerous efforts have been made to record, analyze, and solve the issues faced by Chinese international students on a global scale. The studies have been focused on life, psychological well-being,

academic development, emotional problems, socializing, employment, and so on (Ortiz et al., 2015). However, since the 2020 winter, COVID-19 (novel virus) outbreak has disrupted people's studies, work, and lives. The world seems to have pressed the pause button with city lockdowns, flight suspensions, school closures, workplace closures, social activity cancellations, etc. The pandemic has spread to 209 countries and territories in the world (World Health Organization, 2020). As Chinese international students are left behind in their host countries, they have faced unprecedented challenges such as the fear of illness, lack of community-based support, poor acceptance of remote learning, racial discriminations, a shortage of study materials, financial worries, families and loved ones at a distance, and the expiration of study permits or visas. What is more, the unexpected deterioration of bilateral relations between some Western powers and China (Usher, 2020), and irrational racist remarks and attacks against Asians (Kandil, 2020; Schwartz, 2020) have been leading to more serious challenges to the group's studying and living abroad.

According to statistics from China's Ministry of Education, 1.42 million Chinese international students have mostly chosen to stay in their host locations and fight against the outbreak. They are distributed in different countries and regions, such as 410,000 in the United States, 230,000 in Canada, 220,000 in the UK, 110,000 in Germany and France, and 180,000 in Japan and South Korea (Ma, 2020). At the University of Regina, Canada, for example, of about 800 Chinese international students (University of Regina, 2017), 90% have chosen to stay in Canada. Because different prevention and control measures have been adopted at different stages of the pandemic in the host countries, Chinese international students have been facing different situations with different needs. In Canada, the number of cases increased sharply in March (Government of Canada, 2020) and the timing of the infection peak remained uncertain. For Chinese international students in Canada, novel challenges need to be faced in terms of their academic, mental, physical, and social lives. Their ability to successfully make it through the current adversity requires an in-depth examination.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The overarching purpose of this field study is to: (1) understand Chinese international students' lived experiences in COVID times from the perspective of resilience theory (RT), (2) determine the risk factors to which the students are exposed in COVID times, (3) examine the students' protectively external resources and internal assets during these difficult times, and (4) discuss the interactions between risk factors and protective factors that moderate or reduce the negative outcomes of the students' exposure to adversity. Specific recommendations are made to inform and enhance resilience-based interventions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions to be answered by this study are:

1. How has the outbreak affected the Chinese international students academically and personally?
2. What are the risk factors for the students during such challenging and unusual times?
3. What are the students' internal assets for providing a protective-stabilizing, moderating effect against exposure to such a serious epidemic situation in Canada?
4. What are the students' external supports or resources for protecting them against the negative effects of adversity exposure?
5. How are their protective factors (internal and external) buffering against the negative outcomes due to the COVID-19 pandemic situation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Because of the suddenness of the pandemic's global reach, to date, little research-based literature has focused specifically on the issues of Chinese international students in COVID times. The majority of the articles relating to what this group has been experiencing in these unusual times are news reports. Considering the integrity and coherence of the Chinese international students' research, the researcher reviewed the existing literature from two parts, i.e., the research concerning Chinese international students before COVID times and during COVID times.

Research Focusing on Chinese International Students before COVID Times

The competitiveness of Chinese higher education prompts many Chinese parents with strong financial strengths to send their children to some developed countries for further education (Chao, 2016; Yan, 2015). However, language barriers are the main barrier for Chinese international students. Chinese traditional pedagogy contributes to the adaptation and success of Chinese international students (e.g., Ching et al., 2017). Chinese students feel it is hard to speak out and present in the classroom (e.g., Lin et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2015). Besides, they have to hurdle the pressure from social life, housing, and cultural shock in host countries (e.g., Li, 2016; Oramas et al., 2018). Cultural stereotyping and negative labeling also are part of their barriers faced (Ge et al., 2019).

Research Concerning Chinese International Students During COVID Times

In North America, the reporting articles associated with Chinese international students in COVID times mainly involve the responses of universities to these students' academic developments, life difficulties, travel bans, and incidents of Sinophobia and racism against Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Responses of the Universities in North America

The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement claimed that international students in the United States would have to leave or be deported if the universities they are attending only offer courses (Xu, 2020). Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology tried to sue and stop the action banning international students from staying in the United States during the pandemic (Xu, 2020). In Canada, the universities switched from on-site courses to remote learning and prioritized the health and safety of students. Many universities offered especially online tutoring for them (e.g., the University of British Columbia [UBC], 2020) based on the consideration of the academic barriers of international students. Given students' lives and finances being impacted by COVID-19, some universities have established special scholarships to support international students' academic journey in 2020 (University of Regina, 2020; University of Winsor, 2020).

Life Difficulties

As Gomez et al. (2020) mentioned, with the closure of Canadian university campuses and online-only courses offered in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, all students have to stay in their residents at the most of time. Chinese international students in Canada have been suffering increasingly isolation, loneliness, and the worries about the future. The lack of employment opportunities causes them to have to shoulder severe financial pressure (Sharp, 2020). Moreover, international students are not eligible for either the Canada Emergency Relief Benefit or the Canada Emergency Student Benefit.

Travel Bans

For instance, Fischer (2020) mentioned that some international students have been left behind in the United States due to travel bans. Some have also faced difficulties in getting visas to get back to their home countries. In Canada, in response to the aggravation of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Canadian government has closed its borders to noncitizens and non-permanent residents (Mondaq, 2020). Recently, the travel rule was eased a bit but expensive costs to return China and the consideration to complete their studies have been placing Chinese international students in dilemma (Gu, 2020).

Racial Prejudices

Ever since the coronavirus spread from mainland China to other countries, the news focusing on anti-Asian racist incidents has been emerging in Canada such as physical violence and verbal harassment (Gill, 2020; Moir, 2020). Chinese international students undoubtedly were not immune to this situation. They had a sense of fear and anxiety to continue their studies abroad (Moir, 2020).

Therefore, the present research employed specifically a conceptual frame (RT) and hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology with the discussion of the philosophical presuppositions of hermeneutic phenomenology to explore the experiences of Chinese international students in more detail in COVID times. This study can set out to make up the aforementioned gap.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses RT as a theoretical framework to guide the research process. The original intention of RT was to determine why some adolescents can still grow up to be healthy adults, despite risk exposure and adversity (Garmezy et al., 1984; Rutter, 1985). Gradually, RT has also been used to facilitate positive adaptation. It is inclined to be a strength-based model instead of a problem-directed approach (Graber et al., 2015). Three basic models of resilience (*compensator*, *protective*, and *challenge*) can be used to understand how promotive factors work to protect vulnerable groups from the negative effects of risks (Luthar, 2006; Masten et al., 2007). Specifically, in the protective model, promotive assets or resources change the relationship between risks and sequence outcomes. Moreover, it can be divided into two protective sub-models (risk-protective and protective-protective). As suggested by Zimmerman (2014), risk-protective models refer to the promotive factors that serve to moderate or reduce the association between risks and negative outcomes. Protective-protective models work to reinforce the effects of promotive factors alone to predict an outcome. Also, Rutter (1987) found that resilience was more precisely explained as processes rather than as traits by using the person process-context model. The model offers an easier way for researchers to probe the relationship between risk and protective factors. Rutter (1987) identified six significant predictors of an individual's resilience:

Stressors (i.e., risk factors)—work to activate the resilience process and become disruptions in the homeostasis of individuals, families, groups, or communities.

The external environmental context—refers to the balance of risk and protective factors in a specific environment.

Person-environment interactional processes—individuals either passively or positively try to understand and overcome demanding environments to build a more protective situation.

Internal characteristics—the spiritual, cognitive, behavioral, physical, and emotional strengths that are used successfully, based on different tasks, cultures, and environments.

Resilience processes—the short- or long-term resilience processes learned by individuals through gradual exposure to increasing challenges and stressors that will help the individual bounce back.

Positive outcomes—successful life adaptations regardless of stresses, risks, or traumatic experiences. In other words, individuals have a higher chance of success when faced with negative events later in life if they experienced resilience processes.

As usual, Chinese international students have been placed in an adverse situation. They not only face the barriers from language acquisition, academic development, life, and socializing but also suffer from cultural stereotyping and negative labeling (Ge et al., 2019). The outbreak of the pandemic has been making their situation harder. The intertwining of the existing barriers and the potentially emerging stressors (i.e., risk factors) such as health threats, life difficulties, travel bans, and racism against Asians according to the relevant news reports have been pushing them into unprecedented adversity (Table 1).

Table 1: Chinese International Students’ Main Stressors (i.e., Risk Factors) before and During COVID Times

| The main stressors before COVID times | The potentially emerging stressors during COVID times |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Language acquisition barriers• Life pressures• Cultural shock• Socializing gap• Cultural stereotyping and negative labeling (Ge et al., 2019) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Health threats• Life difficulties (Gomez et al., 2020)• Travel Bans (Gu, 2020)• Racist remarks and attacks against Asians (Moir, 2020) |

According to Rutter (1987)’s resilient predictors, these stressors (i.e., risk factors) listed just would work to activate their resilience process and become disruptions in the homeostasis of this group. That is, in COVID times, it would trigger these individuals’ resilience processes by the interaction between them and the special external environment context. Accordingly, RT can be applied to this disadvantaged group to dig into their process of overcoming adversity by utilizing their protective factors as internal and external. In this study, the protective model was used, which allowed the researcher to comprehensively and dynamically analyze and identify risk factors and protective factors including the participating students’ internal assets and external resources. The aim is to figure out how protective factors are helping reduce and avoid the negative trajectory from risk exposure to negative outcomes due to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

As stated, a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry was used to empower the researcher as a conduit for the taken-for-granted experiences to create meaning and develop an understanding of those who live them (van Manen, 1990). Specifically, hermeneutics is the art of deep-seated interpretation focusing on the “texts” of life (van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology emphasizes how one orients toward lived experience (van Manen, 1990). Hermeneutic phenomenology portrays research that is directed toward lived experience and interprets the “texts” of life (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers attempt to gain the situated meaning of how people interpret and respond to phenomena via language (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). In the present study, the researcher expected to fully understand the experiences of the participating students from their narratives in COVID times. The researcher tried to make a deeper interpretation that moves from seeking to understand these students’ taken-for-granted experiences such as the trouble and difficulty suffered by Chinese international students to developing a sense of the whole based on the protective model of RT (Figure 1) (i.e., analyzing and interpreting further the risk factors and protective factors faced by these students, and the interactions between risk and protective factors to predict a better outcome). As such, it allowed the researcher to uncover further the intended meaning of their experiences in COVID times.

Research Setting

The setting for this study is a medium-sized university located in a Canadian prairie province. More than 50% of the university’s graduate student population comprises international students (Statistics Canada, 2016) and about 14% of the undergraduate student body is made up of international students (Statistics Canada, 2016).

Study Participants

Ten participants (Table 2) (five male students and five female students) enrolled in the university were working toward bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees in nine different faculties. They were between 20 and 30 years old. For the sake of confidentiality, the participants were given pseudonyms. *Homogenous sampling* was used since Chinese international students (specifically those in research settings) possess common traits (i.e., language, staying in Canada in COVID times, studying at the university) (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In these unusual times, it was especially difficult to recruit participants on site so *snowball sampling* was used, where the researcher allowed participants to invite their friends to participate via virtual social networks (Creswell & Poth, 2018), in agreement with the current social distancing and physical distancing recommendations.

Table 2: Characteristics of Participants

| The order of participants (in order of online interviews) | Academic field | Age | Program | Gender | Marital status | Time in Canada before COVID-19 outbreak |
|---|-----------------------|-----|----------|--------|----------------|---|
| 1 | Math | 21 | Bachelor | Male | Single | One year |
| 2 | Petroleum engineering | 30 | Doctor | Male | Married | Five years |
| 3 | Economics | 21 | Bachelor | Male | Single | Two years |
| 4 | Psychology | 22 | Bachelor | Male | Single | One year and half |
| 5 | Geology | 25 | Master | Male | Single | One year |
| 6 | Sociology | 21 | Bachelor | Female | Single | One year |
| 7 | Petroleum engineering | 30 | Doctor | Female | Married | Four years |
| 8 | Education | 28 | Doctor | Female | Married | Three years |
| 9 | Statistics | 21 | Bachelor | Female | Single | One year |
| 10 | Nursing | 22 | Bachelor | Female | Single | One year |

Data Collection

Online, semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom meetings and WeChat videos to learn of the participants’ experiences (their risk factors and protective factors) in COVID times. As a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry as oriented toward lived experience and deeply interpreting the “texts” of life (Creswell & Poth, 2018), unstructured conversations by voice chat were also conducted so that the researcher could learn more about the participants’ anecdotes and stories (van Manen, 1993). The researcher did not take the individual as the subject of analysis, instead, striving to recognize a certain cultural regularity in participants’ accounts so as to probe the phenomena studied at a macro-sociological level (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All of the 20-minute online interviews were conducted during one week at times when the participants felt comfortable. Two interviewees chose to write down their responses because they felt somewhat reserved in speaking fully over the online connection. Participant consent forms were emailed to confirm their participation and a digital audio-recorder was used for the conversations. Participants were asked to answer questions or tell stories in Chinese to ensure the fullness of their narratives. The researcher translated the transcripts into English and returned copies of the translations to the participants for their review.

Data Analysis

Data analysis, within this hermeneutic phenomenological research, sought to use a multileveled analysis by obtaining a deep-seated understanding of data from the exploration of the whole experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After the interview process, the participants' responses to the questions were transcribed verbatim, then filed and labeled systematically. During the labeling process, coding was included in order to specify the date and a participant. As part of a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, the reflexive journal not only works to identify previously held views, but also allows the researcher to actively construct an interpretation of lived experience through the participants' perspectives (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Therefore, referring to their self-reflexive journals, the researcher put the data into thematic clusters according to the protective model of RT (Figure 1), the research questions designed, and the researcher's presupposition of risk factors deriving from the existing news reports (e.g., Gomez et al., 2020; Gu, 2020; Moir, 2020). In the hermeneutic phenomenological research, researchers should bracket their pre-understandings out and consider how to embed their pre-understandings in the interpretive process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Besides, the transcripts included accurately capturing pauses, changes in speech, facial expression, and mood. This process boosted the researcher to verify reiteratively the data. Specifically, the six steps that were used to analyze the data include:

Step 1: Initial coding

Step 2: Revisiting initial coding

Step 3: Developing an initial list of categories or central ideas

Step 4: Modifying your initial list based upon rereading

Step 5: Revisiting your categories and subcategories

Step 6: Moving from categories into concepts (Lichtman, 2006, p. 168).

Limitations

It is important to note that while there are a large number of Chinese international students in Canada during COVID times, this study specifically focused on those enrolling in one of the Canadian universities. The pandemic situation varies in different provinces so the results in this study cannot be generalized. Moreover, this study only included five males and five females. If extending the sampling size or including more males, all males, or all females, it could lead to different results in the research. Besides, although the researcher had some experiences conducting hermeneutic phenomenological research before, it was not enough for her to extrapolate more from the data gained from the participants in this study. Also, as the researcher had to use the Chinese language to gather the research data and translate all data into English, some information may have been omitted or misunderstood by English speakers.

FINDINGS

As mentioned above, the data was obtained from Zoom or WeChat interview transcripts, self-reflexive journals, and the researcher's musings. Also, as stated in the data analysis section, the themes listed in this section were based on the protective model of RT (Figure 1) (i.e., risk factors and protective factors including internal assets and external resources for the participants in COVID times) with the gender comparison. It was worth mentioning that the risk factors in the findings corroborated the researcher's presupposition of risk factors for Chinese international students in the theoretical framework section to some degree.

Risk Factors

Academic Barriers due to Remote Learning

Because of the spread of COVID-19, many countries announced or implemented school closures to slow down the global spread of the disease. Canadian universities are no exception. At the research setting, all classes had been switched to remote delivery since March 19, 2020. In any case, the remote learning led to some academic issues such as a lack of emotional factors in the teaching and learning, and classroom atmosphere. Some laboratory courses could not be completed online and the students' enthusiasm for learning waned. Eight of the study participants mentioned that they could not concentrate on their studies at home because they were distracted by all sorts of things other than study such as playing TV games, eating snacks, and chatting with roommates. For example, Yang (male) said: "Due to COVID-19, I have to take online classes, which negatively affects my mindset. Remote learning is reducing my motivation to study..." Moreover, in these tough times, language barriers seem to be a more serious issue for the participants. For example, Zhang (male) said:

...professors have to reduce class time during distancing teaching. Moreover, the exams also are made online. It is tough a bit for me to have face-to-face classes due to my language, let alone online classes. I do not have enough time to do all questions listed, which causes my scores off...

Some of the participants were also at risk of not graduating on time. Heng (male) stated:

...You know what; one of my classes in the spring/summer semester was canceled because faculty staff said that if distance teaching was used in that class, the effect would not be very good, so I had to wait for the pandemic to end or further notice. And I am a little bit worried about what happens if the school is closed, and maybe I cannot graduate this year. But I think it's probably best if that does not happen...

Wen (female) also said that studying abroad has been drab a bit. Doubtlessly, the current situation has been severely worsened. In a classroom environment, she could focus on her studies due to the conducive study atmosphere. Now, the pandemic situation has tremendously disrupted her normal academic life.

Mental Issues

In these tough times, most of the participants, particularly the female participants, expressed strongly negative emotions and a tendency toward depression. The pandemic situation has appeared to worsen their persistent sense of loneliness and anxiety. Five of the female participants said they felt mentally tortured. For example, Hu (female) said:

...Every morning, my heart strikes in the huge loss and loneliness, and I have to focus on the school's website and deal with all kinds of temporary changes because of the outbreak. Using WeChat and all kinds of social media time occupies more than half of life. Every day, I am in panic, fear, anger, disappointment because all kinds of negative emotions and chaos of the news fill in my brain...

Zheng (female) narrated:

I have no relatives to accompany me so I have to stay in my small apartment every day. The flight was canceled, the outbreak was worse, and I have to deal with a lot of things on my own. This can put a lot of stress on my mind.

Wen (female) reported that some of her friends went home as soon as their classes were over. But they met a lot of trouble getting home (flight cancellation, multiple flight connections, and unforeseeable infection). She felt entangled if she should go back to China or stay in Canada. She always felt down because she was placed in dilemma.

Hui (female) mentioned that the biggest risk was psychological. It was easy to lose control of her emotions. Linda (female) thought that fewer outdoor activities and social contact were more or less affecting her mentality, though she was positive and outgoing as usual.

Health Threats

Due to the limitation of close contact with others, the participants stayed at home, though they were not sick or needed to avoid all possible infections. Nevertheless, the lack of exercise affected their health. Furthermore, they avoided seeing a doctor because of their fear of COVID-19, even though they developed other diseases. For instance, Yong (male) mentioned, "Gym's closure at the university has been impacting my mental state. I often feel dizzy recently."

In addition, Hui (female) said:

...Recently, I have had a toothache. Due to the closure of dentist clinics, I could not see a dentist. I did not dare to go to the emergency of the public hospital as well because I worried about the infection of COVID-19. I had to randomly take some medicines at home and bear the pain but those medicines did not work well. Sometimes, I want to cry...

Heng (male) stated that if he, unfortunately, became infected, he worried that he might not receive good treatment in Canada.

Racial Prejudices and Cultural Shock

The novel coronavirus pandemic has been being accompanied by an outbreak of racism and discrimination, especially against Asians. Viral diseases are often associated with the region or place where the outbreak first occurred. Three of the female participants stated that when local people saw an Asian person wearing protective gear, they tended to retreat involuntarily. In the early stages of the outbreak, wearing masks for the students was causing enormous psychological pressure because the locals seemed to stare at them for a long period. In addition, perhaps because of cultural shock or because the official suggestions were to not wear a mask, the students felt conflicted about whether or not to wear a mask when going outside. The decision to not wear a mask undoubtedly increased the risk of infection. For example, Liang (female) said:

...When I asked an employee in a supermarket why she did not wear a mask, she said that during the period of work, they were not allowed to wear masks unless they were sick. That cultural difference also resulted in a big risk of infection for me...

Wen (female) also mentioned:

Local students didn't mind because the fatality rate wasn't high and it wasn't worth the protection. They regarded the virus as normal flu. I also have experienced discrimination, and I can feel that some foreign students deliberately keep their distance from me.

Protection Factors

Internal Assets

Internal assets refer to intrapersonal positive factors such as perceived competence, coping skills, and self-efficacy (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). In the present study, several internal assets helped protect the students against the aforementioned risks (academic, mental, physical, and racial) in COVID times. Most of the participants, especially male students, reported significant internal assets such as self-efficacy (i.e., believing in oneself) (Bandura, 1994), emotional control, and self-acceptance, which could decrease the negative effects of risk exposure. For example, Hong (male) said:

...I do not think this period of time is particularly difficult for me because I believe I can do very well no matter studying at home or school. I am self-disciplined. Besides, not many patients are here in Regina. It does not affect me very much...

Heng (male) also responded:

...I am positively facing the pandemic. Firstly, I learned the ways of this virus's transmission, then, I adjust my mindset. I should not feel fearful about the virus. I believe a man can conquer any disasters. I already had a good psychological preparation for having the protracted war with the virus...

Zhang (male) thought that the life of studying abroad was boring and monotonous in general so he was used to this type of lifestyle. He did not feel passive or frustrated. He positively told the researcher that all Chinese international students should make a joint effort to make it through these challenging times.

Hu (female) also said:

...What I can do is accepting these problems and solving them. I am very calm in the face of the problems ahead. Every day, I drink vitamin water, ensure early going to bed, have meditation and yoga, and hoard a large amount of milk to make sure my immune system in the best state...

External Resources

External resources for those groups in adversity are factors that are external to the individual that can help overcome the negative effects of risk factors, such as parental support, mentoring, and availability of programming in community organizations (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). In the interviews, external resources such as family connectedness, parental support, peer support, school connectedness, and community support were said to be helping the participants overcome the negative effects associated with risks in the pandemic situation. All of the participants had received masks, glasses, gloves, and special Chinese medicines from their parents, their Chinese friends, and the Consulate of China to ease their concerns about travel and physical health. Heng (male) reported:

...The epidemic situation is getting worse in Canada. My parents have a video call with me every day to know how I am doing and how about my health and how I protect myself. They give me much mental and financial support...

Hu (female) also mentioned that her friends in China chatted with her via WeChat and cared about her, in this period, giving her all kinds of advice. Her friendships helped her to ease her loneliness and worries to some extent. Yang (male) and Linda (female) reported that, despite the self-isolation, they often talked to his friends and family members via WeChat, keeping their spirits and enthusiasm alive, and relieving their sense of loneliness during these tough times.

The university had also established an operational team to monitor the situation and communicate with the campus community. Their web page was updated frequently to provide information for students and staff about the coronavirus outbreak, campus communications, and availability of additional resources and information. The participants thought that this was helpful for them to learn about what was happening. Moreover, the Student Emergency Fund offered support to the students with regard to housing and food insecurity, technology, medical care and prescriptions, travel home, etc. Most of the participants applied for it and received the \$500–\$1,000 funding amounts. The funding was solving their urgent needs and helping to reduce their financial pressures caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. For example, Heng (male) said he had been approved to receive \$500 emergency funding for housing. Linda (female) also had gotten \$950 emergency funding to pay for her housing.

However, while the students' external resources from family, peers, school, and community could help them to overcome adverse impacts, such as negative emotions and physical issues in COVID times, they have not been helped to overcome socializing and academic barriers by their existing resources. As Hu (female) mentioned, "I had planned to be a volunteer in the Folk Festival and join internship activities. However, I had to cancel them now. During the unusual times, there were no social activities at the university and in the community."

The Gender Difference in Risk Factors and Protective Factors

It is worth noting that female participants and male participants have obvious differences in their risk factors and protective factors. In the interviews, all of the five male students seemed to view their academic barriers due to remote learning and physical issues as the main risk factors. As Hong (male) said, "I do not think this period of time is particularly difficult for me. The only impact on me is that I cannot perform my experiments and use the computer lab, which is hindering me to complete my research." Yang (male) responded, I eagerly hope this university can encourage students to wear masks, gloves, and glasses to avoid the transmission of the virus. However, masks were not recommended to wear, which would push students at big risk.

On the contrary, mental issues and racial prejudices seemed to be the key factors to place these female informants at risk. All of the five female participants said they worried about mental health because they felt stressed and even slightly depressed quite often in COVID times. Three of them expressed fear and worries about racist remarks and attacks. They mentioned it was awash of radically racist remarks against Asians in social media.

In terms of protective factors, as compared to female students, male students more efficiently used their internal assets such as self-efficacy (i.e., believing in oneself) (Bandura, 1994), emotional control, and self-acceptance in order to mitigate the negative effects during the pandemic. Like Yang (male) reported, "I must keep refreshment and enthusiasm to overcome these tough times." Only one of the female informants showed apparently self-efficacy and self-regulation.

However, female participants were inclined to utilize more their external resources for support such as family connectedness, peer support, parental support, and school connectedness. They chatted with their parents and friends in China to ease their tensions more frequently than male students. Moreover, more female participants (four female students and two male students) applied for the Student Emergency Fund.

DISCUSSION

As mentioned in the theoretical framework section, the protective model of RT was used to guide the research. The model attempts to examine the interactions between risk and promotive factors for foretelling an outcome (Garmezy et al., 1984). Many researchers have used the theory in quantitative inquiries based on a regression equation (Zimmerman & Brenner, 2010). Nevertheless, as Husserl (1952/1980) critiqued, human issues cannot be probed by a purely quantitative approach, because humans as living subjects are not simply reacting to external stimuli in an automatic manner. Researchers may miss important variables and create an unauthentic situation (Jones, 1975). Therefore, scholars have been trying to employ RT as a theoretical framework in qualitative inquiries (e.g., hermeneutic phenomenological inquiries) to understand or comprehend the lived experience of those who live it with the consideration of their contexts. For example, Benjamin and Black (2012) presented elaborately the lived experiences of newbie special education teachers on the angle of RT in a case study. The authors attempted to examine the protective factors of the novice special education teachers through the detailed description of their lived experiences. They explored how improving protective processes could boost up novice teachers' capacity to deal with adversity in their working life. Therefore, in this hermeneutic phenomenological study, the researcher explored the qualitative potential of the theory to interpret the participants' risk factors and protective factors in detail and the interactive relationships between risk factors and protective factors for these students in COVID times. Based on the protective model of RT, the resilience process can act as a medium to reduce or mediate the negative effects of risk exposure for better than expected outcomes. For Chinese international students, the resilience process can be indicated in Figure 1. In spite of the risk factors such as academic, mental, physical, and racial, which are faced by the participants, the intrapersonal components of the resilience processes include their emotional regulation, self-acceptance, and self-efficacy and their external resources, such as parental support, family connectedness, peer support, and community support, have helped to buffer against their decreased well-being and adjustment in face of the stress they are enduring.

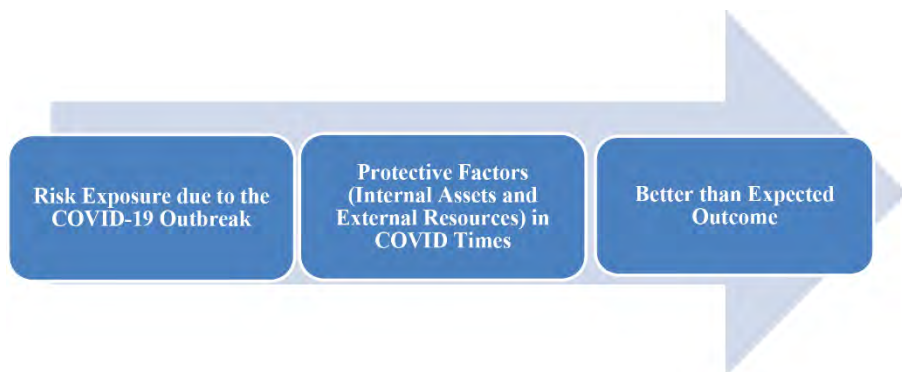


Figure 1: Resilience as a Process for Chinese International Students in COVID Times

Risk Exposure and Negative Consequences

First, the findings show that the participants have been facing academic risk because the COVID-19 outbreak led to the conversion of all face-to-face classes to remote learning at Canadian universities. The students had to study at home, which caused a drop in their motivation to study and additional procrastination. The cancellation of practice courses and decrease in class time due to the limitations of remote teaching negatively affected their absorption and mastery of knowledge. The outcomes that follow might end up with schooling suspension or even dropping out of school. As Heng (male) stated, “I am a little bit worried about what happens if the school is closed, all my efforts will be in vain.”

Second, the mental risk is overwhelming. In some sense, the life studying abroad is monotonous, because the students are far away from their family, friends, and familiar cultural environment. They need to deal with everything unfamiliar to them and live day by day. In COVID times, feelings of loneliness can become especially strong as socializing activities are canceled and everyone needs to maintain their social and physical distancing. Loneliness can reduce an individual’s happiness, affect their quality of sleep, and lead to depression. When someone feels lonely, they are more likely to have depressive symptoms (Hammond, 2018).

Third, self-isolation and the fear of being infected in the hospital lead to physical risk. Staying at home for a long time can reduce an individual’s physical condition or result in suboptimal health due to irregular diet, lack of sleep, and lack of exercise. As Hui (female) said, “I had to take medicine at home and bear the pain but those medicines did not work well.” Minor ailments can easily drag on to become major problems.

Fourth, racial discrimination can lead to lower well-being, lower self-acceptance, and depression, especially during these tough times. Generally, Chinese international students can suffer from some amount of on-campus, cultural stereotyping. For example, the opportunities of Chinese international students asking and answering questions in the classroom are far less than local students. They also tend to be labeled as slow learners in English study (Ge et al., 2019). In COVID times, they also face off-campus discrimination. Overall, they are more likely to be affected by the negative consequences due to racial risk.

Resilience Process and Better Outcomes

In the present study, Chinese international students are being exposed to the pandemic situation in their host country. As presented in the findings, these students have to cope with the emerging risk factors from academics, mentality, physical condition, and racial discrimination during COVID times. Nevertheless, this fact is spurring their resilience processes as they interact with the current situation. According to the participants' narratives, they have been balancing risk factors and protective factors in the current pandemic situation in Canada. Either passively or optimistically, they intend to understand and overcome the current adversities and build a relatively safe environment for themselves. As Hu (female) said:

... I look forward to life can go back where it was but it is impossible because it is right at the moment. Due to the pandemic, all activities planned such as volunteer and internship activities have been canceled. I moved the focus on how to make my life happiness... I can draw, dance, sing songs, and listen to my favorite music, making my life have some fun to avoid negative emotions; I decrease the use of social media, but rather increase the frequency of chatting with my friends and parents...

The participants effectively used their spiritual and emotional strengths, such as self-efficacy (i.e., believing in oneself) (Bandura, 1994), emotional control, and self-acceptance to counter the COVID-19 pandemic by buffering against the negative trajectory associated with academic, mental, physical, and racial risk. As Wen (female) mentioned, "now I don't care what the locals think about anyway. I must wear a mask when going out."

Meanwhile, their external resources such as parental support (affective and financial), peer support, and community support (the university being studied and the Consulate of China in Canada) are helping the individuals bounce-back and avoid "cracking" under pressure. As Yang (male) said, "my parents and friends in China mailed many masks, gloves, and eye protectors to protect me from the infection of the virus." Hui (female) said, "I can be calm in the face of all happenings because my parents and friends always take care of me. I can overcome the difficulties." They have been using resilience processes and building a good adaptive capacity in the current adversity, which may assist them to succeed when encountering negative events in their lifetimes.

The Gender Difference in Resilience Processes

Resilience processes are regarded as a general, rather than domain-specific (Rutter, 2003). That is, it should be a gender-neutral resilient inclination. However, in this study, the gender difference in resilience processes was salient. The findings showed that the female participants' internal assets were not necessarily more effective than those of the male participants. Moreover, the main risk factors pushing them at risk are distinct. In this case, the heritability of resilience among both female and male would play an imperative role in the gender divide in resilience processes. As Boardman et al. (2008) pointed out, the heritability of resilience was higher among men than that of women. Self-efficacy or self-regulation was one of the most important components of psychological function among both men and women. Nevertheless, men were apt to gain additional strengths from environmental mastery. Besides, in the existing research in Chinese international students (e.g., Ge et al., 2019), female students were found to be more passive and vulnerable mentally than male students.

Resilience-Based Interventions

Based on the findings, underlying resilience-based interventions can be offered to enhance their assets and resources, helping them with a more positive adjustment to make it through these challenging times. First, current researchers in the RT research field are focusing on how adults can alter their thinking and improve their emotional and behavioral management in a resilience process. Psychologists and professional counselors can guide adults to recognize their strengths instead of only healing their trauma (Psychology, 2020). Therefore, for internal asset building, online counseling sessions can be made available to students (Chinese or otherwise), especially female students at the university, to ease their tensions and reinforce their self-efficacy, adaptation capacity, and ability to avoid serious psychological problems. Second, in the findings, social activities were cancelled during these times. Moreover, this university did not offer any online socializing activities for them except for financial support or information support. Hence, online socializing activities can be organized such as virtual singing or drawing contests as a school-based intervention to build self-esteem and decrease anxiety. Third, Zagar and Busch (2009) showed that mentoring was a promotive factor for the reduction of risk exposure. Accordingly, online mentoring via Zoom, Google Classroom, or other apps can help reduce the students' academic risk.

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